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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the broken country to the north of Lake Nyasa live the Nyakyusa and Ngonde people who, together with those closely related to them in language and culture, number[1] nearly a quarter of a million. They stretch across the river which divides Tanganyika Territory from Nyasaland and, because they were hemmed in by mountains and swift rivers, they long remained isolated from the outside world. They are skilful herdsmen and cultivators, well fed, and practising a system of green manuring and rotation which allows of fixed cultivation, in contrast to the shifting systems of most of their neighbours.

Their villages are large. Each is occupied by a group of age mates together with their wives and young children. Father and son and grandson *must* live in separate villages and full brothers are commonly separated also. Fathers and young sons are in adjoining villages, but the villages of grown men are scattered about a chiefdom without reference to the genealogical connections of its members. The only kinship relationships common within a village are those of half-brothers and of affines, for a man often marries the daughter or sister of a village mate. But although they live dispersed, agnatic kinsmen are bound together by a strong lineage organization. Property, in the form of cattle, circulates within agnatic lineages, passing from brother to full brother in order of seniority, and thence to the son of the senior brother, who inherits, with the cattle, obligations towards his juniors and a certain authority over them. Half-brothers may also be linked by regular exchanges of cattle—'milking one another's cows', as the Nyakyusa call it. Cattle are given at a marriage by the groom to the bride's father, and distributed by him among his brothers and sons; the bulk of them usually going to one of the bride's full brothers, who retains through life a special responsibility for her and her children. Polygyny is approved. The form most favoured

[1] Throughout this book the present tense refers to the period 1934–8 when the material presented here was collected.

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105 is the marriage of two sisters, or of a woman and her brother's daughter, to the same man; such 'sisters' are closely identified and their children are treated almost as full siblings.

Besides being bound together by a common interest in property —the cattle of the lineage—kinsmen join in the celebration of rituals to their common ancestors; for the very fact of their kinship is held to make them mystically dependent upon one another, and more particularly on the prayers of the most senior among them. At a funeral kinsmen will gather from many of the villages of the chiefdom, and some from other chiefdoms also. The range of kinship recognized varies somewhat with status, but the effective lineage group is normally of a span of three or four generations only, including descendants of a common grandfather or great-grandfather.

105 Traditionally villages were grouped in a number of small in-
571 dependent chiefdoms led by hereditary chiefs. Each chiefdom contained many kinsmen, but there was no fiction of common descent of all the men of a chiefdom, or of chiefs and people. There were thus three types of social group: villages occupied by age-mates, who shared common land rights, and herded and fought together; lineages bound by common interest in inherited cattle and common rituals; and chiefdoms in which the bond was occupation of a common territory and allegiance to a common chief.

105 Relations between the three groups are epitomized in the traditional law relating to theft, adultery, murder, and witchcraft.[1] A man was a member both of a village and of a lineage and both groups were responsible for his behaviour. An adulterer or cattle-thief was speared by the injured party and his kinsmen, if they could catch him. If they could not, they might attack any member of his age-village. This commonly led to war between the villages, but short of this, the kinsmen of the dead man claimed compensation from the thief or adulterer and his kin, not from the avengers. Both lineage and age-village were therefore corporate groups, the members of which were mutually responsible for each other, and it is significant that *both* senior kinsman and village headman of the defendant were required to accompany him when the case came to court. Murder was treated as a private delict, the kinsmen of the dead attacking or claiming compensation from the murderer and his kin, but witchcraft was treated as an offence against the

[1] cf. Monica Wilson, *Good Company* (1952), p. 150.

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state, and the property of a convicted witch went to the chief. Therefore the lineage was not the unrivalled principle of social grouping among the Nyakyusa as it was among the Tallensi or Nuer, but it was a corporate body.[1]

The existence of three types of groups among the Nyakyusa made for social integration. The divergent interests of villages were checked by the fact that every man had kinsmen in many other villages upon whom he was dependent, economically and ritually; the fissiparous tendencies of lineages were checked by the loyalties of lineage members to different villages; and the villages and lineages were all held to be dependent upon their chief for the fertility of their land, control of the weather, and success in warfare.

Since an account of the Nyakyusa age-villages and an outline of their kinship system have already been published,[2] we may now turn directly to the topic of this book, their religion.

The traditional religion of the Nyakyusa people has three elements: First, there is a lively belief in the survival of the dead and in the power of senior relatives, both living and dead, over their descendants; secondly, there is a belief in medicines, that is, in a mystical power residing in certain material substances which is used by those who have the requisite knowledge; thirdly, there is a belief in witchcraft, that is, an innate power to harm others exercised by certain individuals, and in the mystical power of fellow villagers to punish wrongdoers. This last power, 'the breath of men', is akin to witchcraft. It may be objected that a belief in witchcraft is in no sense 'religious', but to exclude discussion of it in an account of Nyakyusa religion is comparable to excluding a reference to the devil in a discussion of Christianity. Evil is a reality which must be interpreted in one fashion or another in every cosmology.

The belief in the survival of the dead and the power of senior relatives, is expressed in a series of elaborate rituals, one set of which concern only kinsmen and are directed towards the im-

[1] There appear to be many gradations between a society with no corporate lineages, such as the Lozi, and one like the Tallensi in which the lineage is the basis of all important social groups, just as there are gradations between a stateless society in which all offences are treated as quarrels between groups of kinsmen, and a primitive state in which any serious assault is an offence against the state.

[2] Monica Wilson, op. cit. and 'Nyakyusa kinship' in *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*, ed. Radcliffe-Brown and Daryll Forde (1951).

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mediate ancestors of the participants, and another set which concern chiefdoms and groups of chiefdoms, and are directed towards the immediate ancestors of ruling chiefs and certain distant ancestors of the chiefs' line, heroes in Nyakyusa history. The name of one of these heroes, Kyala, has been used by the missionaries to translate the word 'God', but all the evidence available goes to show that Kyala was, traditionally, but one of several distant ancestors to whom regular sacrifices were made on behalf of a large group of chiefdoms. All the rituals of this type—those directed to family shades, the chiefs' ancestors, and the heroes—are concerned with that which is beneath (*pasi*), not that which is above. Men look to the earth where corpses are buried, not to any sky god.

The theme of the present volume is the rituals celebrated by kinsmen at death, at the puberty and marriage of a girl (the last two events usually coinciding), at birth, especially twin birth, and in misfortune. A further volume will deal with the communal rituals celebrated before the annual break of the rains; whenever public misfortune such as drought, flood, famine, or plague occurs or threatens; before battle; and when a chief is succeeded by his sons, and the younger generation take over power from their elders. There is no circumcision or initiation of men other than the 'coming out' ceremony, when a whole generation takes over responsibility for the administration and defence of the chiefdom from their fathers. Some reference to three of the heroes—Kyala, Lwembe, and Mbasi—is made in texts on the rituals of kinsmen, but our discussion of them is postponed to the second book in which the rituals directed to them are described.

A section of the Nyakyusa people is Christian and its influence on pagan thought and practice is appreciable; however, discussion of this is also postponed to the second book, since it is most evident in the changing concept of Kyala. There, too, the connections between change in ritual and other aspects of the social structure between 1934 and 1955 are analysed.

The Nyakyusa cult of senior relatives (like any ancestor cult) is not intelligible or significant apart from a study of kinship, and it may be argued that this material should be presented only as part of an analysis of Nyakyusa kinship, but we cannot discuss everything at once and some measure of abstraction is necessary. No one ritual among the Nyakyusa is fully intelligible without reference to the whole series of rituals. The principle, propounded forty-five years ago by Professor Radcliffe-Brown, that a symbol

11:Thwaites C-5 (ca. 1942) 1944
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WANYAKYUSA AGRICULTURE

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131 The Wanyakyusa occupy the District of Rungwe in the Southern Highlands Province. The district lies between 9° and 9½° S. latitude
133 at the northern tip of Lake Nyasa. The altitude ranges from 1,500 feet to 9,500 feet. The
631 district is divided into twelve chiefdoms. The Administrative Headquarters are at Tukuyu, which was known before the British occupation as Neu Langenberg.

Inhabitants

101 The local people are not indigeneous to this area. They came, tradition has it, from
[173] Mahenge via Ukinga after many tribal fights. They are akin to the Wahenga in Nyasaland bordering on the Tanganyika boundary. It is
191 estimated that only 10 per cent of the Wanya-
161 kyusa speak Kiswahili. According to the 1935 census the total poulation was 153,204. The
162 total number of tax-payers in 1942 was 35,304, or 23.04 per cent of the total population.

181 The people themselves are extremely industrious and intelligent. As there are 90 people to the square mile, living conditions are
105 crowded and emigration is continually taking place. The people are partial to litigation over cattle and women. The number of cases heard annually in the Native Courts is about 6,000. There is no one historical and traditional head of the tribe. The twelve Chiefs are, in reality, hereditary Headmen who have been selected by Government to be Chiefs. They are in effect only *primi inter pares* in native eyes, the outlook of the people being unusually democratic for a native tribe.

105 The people live in houses made of wattle and daub or bamboo frame, with thatched
342 roof, and villages are sited mostly along ridges.
361 Rectangular houses are now built instead of the round huts of former days. They often stand in rows with a main street down the middle with bananas in the background. The more progressive natives build with sun-dried or burnt brick. Stock are stalled in the same house owing to the prevalence of thieving, but sleep in separate rooms.

Climate

132 The rainfall of the district varies in the different areas. In Tukuyu itself the annual average for 25 years (1918-1942) is 100.22 inches. On the Lake shore the average is probably higher, but no continuous statistics are available. The heaviest rainfall months are from December to May, but, in most years,

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Identification

The Ngonde (Konde, Nkonde, Wangonde) with whom are included the closely-related Sukwa in N Nyasaland and the Nyakyusa (Niakiusa, Sochile, Sokile) with the closely kindred Kukwe, Mwamba, and Selya (Seria, Salya), are a Bantu nation related to the Lambya and Iwa linguistically. The Ngonde division numbered 62,000 in 1945, and the Nyakyusa division 163,000 in 1931.

Basic Economy

Primarily agricultural, with fixed cultivation, fallowing, crop rotation, and use of green manure. The staple crop is bananas, but maize, finger millet (eleusine), and manioc are also extremely important. Other crops include sweet potatoes, taro, peanuts, beans, cow peas, pumpkins, and rice (introduced by the Arabs). There are numerous short-horned cattle, but relatively few sheep and goats. Milk is an important food, but cattle are not eaten except at death feasts; they are reserved primarily for taxes, fines, and marriage payments. Chickens, dogs, and bees are also kept, but only men eat eggs. Fishing and hunting are unimportant. Fishing is done with nets, weirs, spears, and hooks; hunting, with traps, pitfalls, and ambush.

Sex Division of Labor

Boys herd cattle and men milk them; they are taboo to women. Men also do all the hunting and most of the fishing, although women catch small fry with dipnets. Men clear the land and hoe the crops; the women plant, weed, and harvest, but do appreciably less agricultural work than the men, who spend 4-6 hours a day in hoeing throughout the year.

Property

Cattle are the most important possessions; they belong mainly to men. Among the Nyakyusa, millet and rice belong to men, all other harvested crops to women. Pasture land and waste land are the collective property of the village under its headman. Trees and bamboo are private property. Agricultural land belongs to the village and is distributed by the headman among individual men. The latter enjoy usufruct rights only, parceling out most of their land

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among their wives but keeping some for their own use. A man can keep land rights in another village so long as he maintains cultivation, but they are not inherited as part of his estate.

Inheritance is patrilineal, with matrilineal survivals. Positional succession prevails; a man's cattle, movables, dwelling, land (in his own village), and widows are inherited by a single heir. The order of priority is Br, half Br, ElSo (always the ultimate heir), ElBrElSo, etc. In default of any near patrilineal heir a SiSo inherits.

Social Stratification

The Ngonde proper have a mild form of slavery resulting from capture in war, debt, or seduction of a chief's wife; a slave woman becomes free by marrying a free man, and the children of all slaves are free. Chiefs are distinguished from commoners, and there are wealth distinctions.

Marriage

The normal mode of marriage is by payment of a negotiated and substantial bride-price in cattle (8-12 among the Nyakyusa). Sibling linkage prevails, a sister's bride-price being used to obtain a wife for her paired brother. Elopement also occurs, being regularized by subsequent payment of the customary bride-price (in the case of a Nyakyusa married woman by refunding the bride-price to her first husband and paying an adultery fine of 2 cows). Another alternative to a negotiated bride-price is bride-service (for men lacking cattle); in such cases the eldest Da belongs to her mother's father. A man receives the bride-price for his first wife from his Fa (sometimes a FaBr or MoBr for whom he works), who gets the cattle from (1) their natural increase and (2) marriage payments received for daughters, sisters, and brothers' daughters. Marriage-cattle transactions are extremely complex. The cattle are paid in installments over a period of years. The recipient (normally WiFa) distributes the cattle to his sons and brothers for their marriages, later getting cattle back from them when their daughters marry.

Polygyny is general, and is preferentially but not exclusively sororal. The first Wi is the chief wife; the second is usually her Si, the third her BrDa; over each of these a man has a prior right. Both the levirate and the sororate prevail, and marriage is allowed

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with a FaSi, though forbidden with a SoWi. Each co-wife has her own separate hut, or at least a separate alcove in a long hut. A survey of 3,000 Nyakyusa adult males showed 34% to be bachelors, 37% monogamous, and 29% polygynous; 70% of the women lived in polygynous families; 90% of long-lived men eventually became polygynous, but few men married before 25 or became polygynous before 45.

Family

Polygynous families are the norm. A typical household includes a man, his wives, his young sons, and his unmarried daughters; associated with it are banana groves surrounding the huts and scattered plots cultivated with other crops.

Residence

Neolocal residence is the norm. Because of extremely strong avoidance between a SoWi and her HuFa (and all his classificatory brothers), boys between the ages of 11 and 13 from an entire district move from their fathers' homes to a new age-village of their own in the vicinity. Until marriage, they continue to eat with their mothers and hoe with their fathers, but thereafter they hoe on their own land near the age-village, where their wives join them. A girl goes to visit and sleep with her betrothed several years before she sets up house with him. A man, to better himself, may remove to another village at will, e.g., that of a FaBr or MoBr, for whom he hoes and eventually receives marriage cattle in return. A man may also attach himself to another village if discontented with his own headman. Among the Nyakyusa, matrilocal residence with bride-service is an alternative to neolocal residence with bride-price; in such cases at least some of the children belong to their MoFa or MoBr rather than to their own Fa.

Kin Groups and Exogamy

Local exogamy is absolute under the age-village system.

Marriage is forbidden with any first cousin, and disapproved with any second cousin. The Nyakyusa have bilateral kindreds, called ikikolo, and are reported formerly to have practiced preferential cross-cousin marriage.

Descent is patrilineal. There are patrilineal lineages, apparently

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agamous. Lineages three or more generations in depth are involved in the control and exchange of cattle, in inheritance, and in certain rituals, but in certain other respects it is the kindred rather than the lineage which functions. Genealogies are reckoned patrilineally for 6-9 generations, bilaterally for about 4 generations. The kindred is exogamous.

Probable survivals of matrilineal descent include residual inheritance by a SiSo and the special relationship between a MoBr and SiSo (since a MoBr secures a wife with Mo's cattle, his nephew can make free with his property and has a right to receive one cow from him to establish his own herd).

Kinship Terminology

Fa, FaBr--tata. Mo, MoSi--juba. Ch--umwanangu (also BrCh, (ms), and SiCh (ws). ElBr (ms), ElSi (ws)--unkulu. YoBr (ms), YoSi (ws)--unuguna. Br (ws), Si (ms) --ulilumbu. Hu--undume. Wi--unkasi.

MoBr, SiCh (ms)--umwipwa. FaSi--jubasenga ("cattle mother"). BrCh (ws)--umwanasenga. GrFa, GrMo, GrCh--umwinukulu.

Sibling terms are extended to parallel cousins. Cross-cousin--untani.

Settlement Pattern

The community is a straggling village of 30-40 households (among the Ngonde proper a cluster of huts about 30 yards apart with banana groves between, the huts being aligned in two rows facing each other). Dwellings are round with cylindrical walls and conical roofs. Rectangular structures with walls and saddle roofs also occur, but usually as cattle stalls rather than dwellings.

Community Organization

Each community is an age-village (efepanga), occupied by men born within five years of one another, together with other men who have changed their village. There are no kin villages or clans. Circumcision and clitoridectomy are not mentioned.

Local Government

Each age-village has a headman, called "great commoner" (olifumu), selected by the chief and senior headman of the district. There is no unilinear rule of succession.

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State

Clusters of 6-12 age-villages are organized into essentially autonomous districts with paramount chiefs (olifumu), of whom there are 60 among the Nyakyusa. These districts range in population from a few hundred to about 10,000. A chief's power is limited by the influence of the local headmen and by the freedom of men to change village membership. Each chief is succeeded by two sons--the ElSo respectively of his first and his second wife. Well before his death he divides his land at a ceremony called "coming out" (ovosoka), his sons being about 35 at this time. New headmen are selected at this time, and the villages of the chiefdoms are realigned in two groups; the maturing boys of the new age-villages are given permanent land. The retiring chief, however, retains his religious functions until his death. At the "coming out" each new chief ceremonially marries his two "great wives," each of whom will produce an heir and successor, and settles in a senior age-village, assuming secular authority over his half of the existing age-villages, which are split into two "sides" in anticipation of the next division. Among the Ngonde proper, but not among the Nyakyusa, there is a paramount chief over the entire tribe, with divine-king attributes; he exercises purely religious ascendency over the chiefs, who are practically independent in secular matters; there are also "territorial nobles" who are succeeded by only one son each. The only similarity to the Ngonde paramount chiefship among the Nyakyusa is a sentimental religious bond uniting the Selya and some Mwamba and Nyakyusa chiefdoms to a sacred Selya grove.

Warfare

Warfare was formerly endemic, both intra- and extra-tribally. It was waged to avenge wife or cattle stealing and insults to depose chiefs. The sources do not mention cannibalism or headhunting.

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